

Tract  
on  
Slavery by  
Elihu Coleman  
of  
Nantucket

Reprinted 1934

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## ADVERTISEMENT

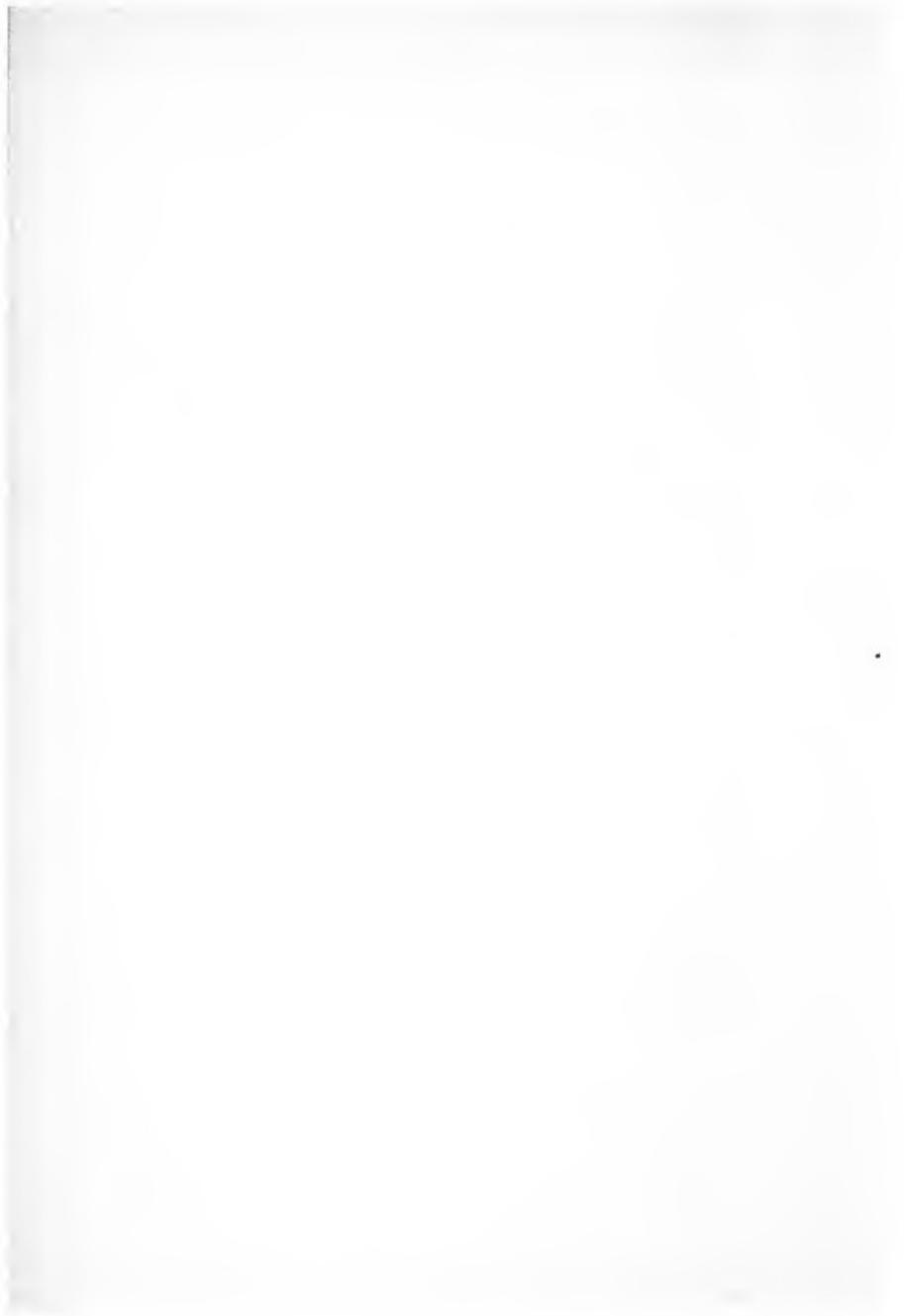
### TO THE PRESENT EDITION.

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ELIHU COLEMAN, the Author of the following Tract on Slavery, was born at Nantucket, in the 12th month, 1699, and died there in the 1st month, 1789, in the eighty-ninth year of his age. He was a Minister of the Society of Friends. To preserve the remembrance of his labors, in a cause then comparatively new, is the principal inducement to the re-publication of a work, which must have had an influence in enlightening the public mind in that day; and of which it is not known that more than one copy is now extant. The Author himself refers, in his Preface, to other writings on the same subject, and it appears from Clarkson's History of the Abolition, that WILLIAM BURLING, of Long Island, wrote several tracts on the unlawfulness of Slavery, one of which was published in 1718; and that RALPH SANDIFORD, a Merchant, of Philadelphia, published a tract on this subject, in the year 1729, entitled "The Mystery of Iniquity, in a Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times." These, it is believed, were the earliest publications, written by Friends in this country, on this interesting topic. The following piece was written, as appears by the date, in 1729-30, and published in 1733; its Author was certainly one of the first *public* advocates for the cause of the oppressed Africans, in New England. The subject had previously engaged the attention of Friends in a Society capacity.

5-15-34

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## TO THE READER.

BEFORE I speak of the unlawfulness of this practice of making Slaves, it is in my mind to give a relation how, and after what manner I came to understand it so; and for why, and for what reason I now speak against it. After I had arrived to the years of a man, I was very desirous that I might come to know the Lord for myself: For although I did believe I was educated or taught the right way, yet upon serious consideration, I came to see that the religion of a man's education, was not the religion of his, but of them that educated him: and therefore I was very desirous to know him for myself; for I read in Scripture, that when destruction came upon the city, that if Daniel, Noah and Job were in it, they by their righteousness could save none but their own souls. And although I might live in the midst of a righteous people, I saw that it would not avail anything to me. And as I was thus concerned, it pleased the Lord, in his own time to manifest himself to me, in some small degree and measure, so that then I could discern things aright in some degree; and after I had considered the principles of those my friends called Quakers, I did, and now do believe that they are undeniably good, and that those that

keep close to them, I do believe that there can never any weapon be formed that shall prevail against them. And as I considered thereon, I found a necessity in myself to join with those people, whose principles were so good: yet notwithstanding I must confess, (and for that reason I now write) that as I knew a necessity to join with them in that which was good; the same necessity I now find to speak against that which is evil, although it may be in some of them. For the Lord made me sensible in that convincing day, that he would not allow of sin, although it might be in Jacob, and that transgression in Israel should not go unpunished, and that he would yet again search Jerusalem as with candles, and bring to light the hidden things of dishonesty.

And now, although some may think it hard to have this practice spoken against, that has been carried on so long pretty much in silence; I may let such know that I have found it hard to write against it; yet nevertheless, believing it to be my duty so to do, I have written according to the understanding I have had thereof. And although I have written but little, and in a very plain way, yet I hope that those remarks I have made thereon, may serve as a text for some to preach to themselves upon. I am not unthoughtful of the ferment or stir that such a discourse as this may make among some, who (like Demetrius of old) may say, by this craft have we our wealth, which caused the people to cry out with one voice, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians, whom all Asia and the world worship. Therefore leaving such to worship what they will, I will also say, that there are many sober men that

have spoken against this practice, both by writing and in their public assemblies, whom I could name, but choosing to be brief, I will only observe to the Reader, what I myself have observed, and that is, that those people that dwell nearest the truth, and are most engaged in it, and are more concerned for the spreading of it than for anything in this world beside, cannot allow of this practice, they seeing it to be oppression and cruelty.

Now I having spoken something of the reason why I have wrote this, I will conclude this my preface, wishing the Reader an impartial judgment.



A TESTIMONY AGAINST  
THAT  
ANTI-CHRISTIAN PRACTICE  
OF  
MAKING SLAVES OF MEN.

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SUCH hath been the love and goodness of God to men, that in all ages of the world he has had a people, family or church whom he hath called and also chosen, to bear a testimony to his name and truth: Yet it may be observed by them that read the Holy Scriptures, that those people whom he had called, and favoured above all the families of the earth, and had wrought signs and wonders for them, and had exalted them in the sight of their enemies; that those people in times of liberty and ease, grew forgetful of God. This aptness to forget God in a time of ease, the Apostle Paul well knew, after that he had a thorn in the flesh, or the messenger of Satan to buffet him (as he calls it) for before he was afflicted he went astray, therefore he knew chastisement or affliction to be profitable for him, and could then say, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: For when I am

weak, then am I strong. 2 Cor. xii. 10. It may also be observed by them who read the Book of Martyrs, or sufferings of the people of God, from the time our Lord was crucified, down to the reign of the bloody Queen Mary, (which history I do believe is believed to be true by most protestants) that in all that length of time, God had a people whom he had called out of the worship, ways and customs of the world, who were a suffering people, and that in the midst of their greatest sufferings, they were the most immediately upheld by the Divine power of God; so that they could even rejoice in the flames. But when it pleased God that a good King or Emperor came to rule, so that they were not persecuted or oppressed, that they grew forgetful of God, and some of them became oppressors themselves. Now I do believe that God sometimes afflicteth outwardly, and sometimes inwardly, who best knows the rod that is suitable to chastise with. We may observe also how it hath been with our elder friends, who were a harmless and suffering people, who did not only bear testimony in word, but in practice also, against all outward and carnal weapons; which our friend Robert Barclay observing, said, that it was their innocent lives and conversations that convinced him, before ever he inspected into their principles. He did not see them in this practice of making slaves of their fellow creatures, which practice is upheld by the carnal sword only, but he bore a testimony against the carnal sword, and would not allow of it to be used, although it were in self preservation. Such innocency was in that worthy man, as well as

in many others in that day, that they would not allow of this practice, having more regard to that command of Christ, (to do to others as we would they should do to us) than to any outward advantage in this world. And after our friend George Fox had travelled in the island of Barbadoes, in the West Indies, where he saw this practice of making slaves, even to that degree, that their houses were black with them, that he bore open testimony against it, when he got home he wrote a little book to them, wherein I find these words:—“And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years, then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee, and when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty; thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy flour, and out of thy wine press, of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee, thou shalt give it to him. And remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day.’ Deut. xv. 12, 13, 14, 15. See here this was to be done by the Jews to such as were of their own people; and indeed this will very well become christians, masters, governors and rulers of families here in this island or elsewhere, who should outstrip the Jews to deal so (as the Lord commanded) with their servants and apprentices, that were of their own nation or people: and to close up all, let me tell you, it will doubtless be very acceptable to the Lord, if so be that masters of families here would deal so with their servants, the

negroes and blacks whom they have bought with their money, to let them go free after a considerable term of years, if they have served them faithfully: and when they go and are made free, let them not go away empty handed. This I say will be very acceptable to the Lord, whose servants we are, and who rewards us plentifully for our service done him, not suffering us to go away empty. For ‘who is there even among you,’ saith the Lord, ‘that will shut the doors for nought? neither do you kindle a fire on mine altar for nought.’ Mal. i. 10. So now you I say, that are Christians, that are redeemed out of the spiritual Egypt; for as the Apostle saith, 1 Cor. vii. 22. ‘He that is called in the Lord being a servant, is the Lord’s free-man,’ that is, set free from sin, and spiritual bondage. Be ye holy, as your heavenly Father is holy; and be ye merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful; as is commanded you in Luke vi. 36. And this is the way to have the lost image of God restored and renewed in us; therefore I say, you spiritual Jews, you must exceed the outward Jews in this, who are come to Christ, who is a merciful and faithful High Priest, who is the Saviour of all men, and who tasted death for all men. Heb. ii. 17.

“And let not your families of whites and blacks be like Sodom and Gomorrah, like Zeboim, and the rest of the cities of the plain, or like the Canaanites: lest sudden destruction come upon you, and the Lord root you out as he did them. Let not, I say, your servants under your command, and such as are born in your houses, and bred up in your families, and such as you have bought with money, suffer them not (I say) to

take husbands and wives at their pleasure, and then leave them again when they please, and then take others again as fast and suddenly as they will, and then leave them; this is not well, this may bring the judgments of God upon you; yea, this manifests your families to be unclean and adulterated families."

Now by these words, (though but a small part of what he wrote) we may see that he was against making slaves of men. Now I do believe if men were ingenuous to acknowledge to the truth, even as their consciences bear them witness, I need not go any farther for a proof against this practice: but because they be not, I will turn also to the Holy Scriptures, that so they that are in this practice may be condemned by both.

First, we may observe, when God had created man, that he gave him a free will, and would not compel the will of man, no not to that which was good, much less to that which was evil; therefore we ought not to compel our fellow creatures.

*Objection.*—But had not God's people bond-servants in all ages of the world, bought with their money?

To which I answer, that in all the time of the law they had bond-servants bought with their money; but the Apostle saith, "The servant abideth not in the house ever." Now the word *servant* I understand to be but for a time, but the word *slave* forever. And those that merchandised in slaves we may find were Babylon's merchants, Rev. xviii, 13. And those that had bond-servants under the law, were commanded to let them go free after some time of service, and they were not to let them go empty handed neither, which

some of them not observing, the Lord complained by the prophet Jeremiah, that they "have not hearkened unto me, in proclaiming liberty every one to his brother, and every man to his neighbor: behold I proclaim a liberty for you, saith the Lord, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine, and I will make you to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth." Jer. xxxiv. 17.

*Objection.*—But they were of their own nation that the command was against; now these negroes are not of our own nation, but are mere infidels and strangers.

To which objection I'll answer as it is written in Ex. xxii. 24, "Ye shall neither vex a stranger nor oppress him, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." And Exod. xxiii. 9. "Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." Now I do not find that it is any more allowable to make a slave of an unbeliever than a believer, seeing we are commanded, Matt. vii. 12,—"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them, for this is the law and the prophets." Now we may see that this was not only a command of Christ's, but was the law and the prophets also; and those that come to observe that command, even fulfil both tables at once. Now I have often considered how earnestly some men will search into the etymology or original of some things that may be but small, and in the mean while omit the greater. Now in my judgment everything ought to be looked upon according to the importance, weight or value of the thing; for to be very zealous in a

small thing, and to pass lightly over a greater, that zeal may be more properly called superstition than good zeal, which should be grounded upon knowledge. Now I would have all to consider of this practice of making slaves of negroes, or others that we can get the mastery over, to see upon what foundation it stands, or to see what the original of it was, whether or no pride and idleness was not the first rise of it, that they might go with white hands, and that their wives might, (Jezebel like) paint and adorn themselves, and their sons and daughters be brought up in idleness, which may be very well termed the mother of all vice; for it is generally the richest sort of people that have them, that could do best without them, for the poor are not so able to get them.

But some may object, as I myself have heard them, that there was a mark set upon Cain, and they do believe that these negroes are the posterity of Cain, because of their hair, and their being so black, differing from all others, and that Canaan was to be a servant of servants to his brethren, whom they take to be of the same lineage: But if we do but observe, and read in the genealogy of Cain, we may find that they were all drowned in the old world, and that Canaan was of the line of Seth. And although it was of the will of God that the world was drowned, because of their great wickedness; yet we may observe also, that there were unclean beasts went into the ark, as well as clean, and that it was the will or permission of God, that there should be a Ham, as well as a Shem and Japhet: by which we may see that God suffers wicked men

to live as well as righteous, and we find that the sun shineth on the evil as well as on the good, and that the rain falleth on the unjust as well as the just, and that Christ forbids his followers to meddle with the tares lest they hurt the wheat; therefore, none can have any plea for making of them slaves, for their being either ignorant or wicked; for if that plea would do, I do believe they need not go so far for slaves as now they do.

And although Canaan was to be a servant of servants to his brethren, yet the Lord afterwards spake by the prophets, that the son should not bear the iniquity of the father, and the father should not bear the iniquity of the son, but the soul that sinneth should die. Then the posterity of Canaan or of Ham, do not bear their sins: And the Apostle Peter saith, "Now I perceive of a truth that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him." Now although the negroes might not have the understanding that some other nations have, then I do believe there is the less required, and if they do but as well as they know, I do believe it is well with them. For John the Divine saith in the Revelations, that he saw them that were 'sealed in their foreheads, of the tribes of Israel, of each tribe twelve thousand, which made an hundred and forty-four thousand: And after this I beheld, (said he) and lo a great multitude which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands, and they cried with a loud

voice, saying, salvation to our God, which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb." Rev. vii. 9, 10. Now if there were of all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, then there were some of the negroes.

Now although the Turks make slaves of those they can catch, that are not of their religion, yet (as history relates) as soon as any embraces the Mahometan religion, they are no longer kept slaves, but are quickly set free, and for the most part put to some place of preferment; so zealous are they for proselytes and their own religion. Now if many among those called Christians, would but consider how far they fall short of the Turks in this particular, it would be well; for they tell the negroes that they must believe in Christ, and receive the christian faith, and that they must receive the Sacrament, and be baptized, and so they do; but still they keep them slaves for all this. Now how partial are those that can judge a negro that should run away from his master to deserve beating, and if one called a christian (although he may be no better christian than the other) should run away from the Turks, they can judge him to be a good fellow, and to have done well. Now I look upon this practice of making slaves to be so great a sin, that even men whose principles will allow of killing men in their own defence, will not allow of their making slaves; for they counting it better to deprive them of life that rise up against them, than to deprive those of liberty that have done them no harm.

Now if any one should ask one of the negro's masters that had a negro child and a child of his

own, what harm the one had done that it should be made a slave more than the other? that they would not I believe be able to answer it; and if they have done us no harm, (as it is evident they have not) then it is very contrary to scripture, and even to nature, to make them suffer. Now if we will but look back into the original of this practice, which ought to be most looked into, and spoken against; for until the cause is removed, I know not how the effect should cease; we shall find that they were stolen in the first place either by them that fetched them, or they carrying such goods as induced some of their own nation to steal them; and they standing ready to receive them, which is as bad as if they had stolen them themselves.

Now we may find that man-stealing and man-slaying were joined together, and there was the same punishment for the one as for the other. See Exod. xxi. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. 'And he that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall surely be put to death. And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hands, he shall surely be put to death.' We may find it also in the New Testament joined with the worst of murderers, as such as were murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, and man-stealers. 1 Tim. i. 9, 10. The prohibition is general, he that stealeth away man, a brother or a stranger, or heathen, or any man, the punishment is capital; for he that killed was to be put to death, because it was the image of God. Gen. ix. 6. So he that robbeth a man of his freedom, which only maketh knowledge useful,

seems to deface the image of God, and therefore is punished with death.

*Objection.*—But how can this practice of making slaves be so great a sin, when it is so generally practiced among all the societies of people? For let them differ about what they will else, they pretty generally agree about this.

To which objection I answer, That if they did but as well agree about all other points as they do about this, they might almost if not altogether be termed one community; yet I cannot find this to be a proof: for I take it for a maxim, that in a general way, the negroes are cruelly used; and therefore I do not find, that there agreement in making slaves can be an example for us, any more than their using them cruelly. Therefore if we would but consider the thing rightly, we shall not find that to be a proof, because it is so general a practice. For we may observe how it was when our Lord was crucified, that there were divers sects of people, and of very differing minds, yet in putting him to death they could generally agree; and though they were so much at variance, that as the proverb is, they were at daggers drawing, yet the text has it, ‘that the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends.’ Yet some that have annotated thereon, have not scrupled to call that a cursed friendship, that was contracted by putting to death our Lord, that came in love to their souls. But I have a further reply to make to what I have said before, of the general agreement of making slaves; namely, that there are some of all persuasions, I do believe, that cannot allow of this practice: for they seeing it to be contrary to Christ’s command, and even to

nature: for I have made this observation myself, (though but young in years) that those that dwell nearest the truth, and contend most for it, cannot allow of this practice, for they see it to be oppression and cruelty. But it may be objected that there have some spoken against this practice, and they have come to nothing, or have not prospered in it. To which I answer that a good cause may be badly managed, and by sad experience we often see it is so. Now I do believe by what hath already been said, that all that have not concluded beforehand that they would not see, may see this practice of making slaves to be anti-christian; for it cannot be of Christ, because contrary to his command; therefore of antichrist.

Now, I have heard some men say that they believe they did wrong in getting negroes, but that they did not know what to do with them now that they had got them; for if they let them go free after some time, if any mishap befel them, their estates were obliged to maintain them. And though they seem to acknowledge the wrong done to them, yet they seem to be very much afraid lest they should be forced to help them a little, and so seem to rest contented. Now, suppose that to give the negroes their times, or let them go free here in this country, was wrong, which I do not believe would be wrong, after they had served them some time; but if it were wrong to let them go free, whether or no those that see they did wrong in getting them, ought not to bear a testimony against it? For their keeping them and being silent encourages others to get them. For instance, the Apostle Paul's advice to the believers, not to join themselves in mar-

riage, a believer with an unbeliever, for he counted it wrong; even so do I; but if a believer had got a wife that was an unbeliever, I do not think that he should put her away, yet notwithstanding the practice was wrong, and ought to be spoken against.

Now I can truly say that this practice of making slaves of men, appears to be so great an evil to me, that for all the riches and glory of this world, I would not be guilty of so great a sin as this seems to be. And I do believe many would see it so, were they not blinded by self-interest. Now as I said in the beginning, how apt men were to forget God in a time of liberty, as we now seem to have, which if rightly considered, we ought the more to remember him, and to prize his favour therein. For I do believe if persecution was on foot again, and people were haled to prisons as they have been in times past, that many would have more regard to their own practices than now they have. For this practice of making slaves tends to many evils, as parting man and wife, and children from them both, and thereby causing them to commit adultery with others, and so their children cannot come to honor them. And all this is done by violence, which is forbidden in the scriptures: for there we are commanded to do violence to no man. And lastly, it is a hindrance to the spreading of the Gospel among those poor creatures, for whom (as well as others) our Lord came and laid down his life, and also hath said, that his Gospel should be preached unto all nations. But some may object, as I have heard them, that by this means they come to hear the Gospel preached, and they be-

lieved this was the way our Lord intended that nations should have the Gospel preached to them, viz., to be brought slaves here. To which I'll say, the reader may quickly suppose what people these are, for it must be they that buy the Gospel pretty dear themselves, or else they would not think that the negroes should be bond-slaves, and their children after them, for the knowledge of the Gospel. But I do not find that the Gospel was either bought or sold for money; neither do we find that God compelled any to receive it, but only intreated them or advised them to choose life and live. Now by this practice they hate the name of a christian; for all of us they can get (say they) they make slaves of, and even nature itself tells them that it is wrong.

Now I would have all seriously to consider, that love their own souls, and do believe that they must give an account for the deeds done in the body, to look into their own practices, to see upon what foundation they stand; for God will not forgive, what is in our power to help.

Now I having shown by Scripture the unlawfulness of this practice, as it is now in use, both in the Old Testament and in the New. And now, I would have all to turn their minds inward, to that divine monitor and counsellor, placed in the heart of man, which is as agreeable to the Holy Scriptures (I do believe) as any internal thing can be to an external one; to which I'll leave my reader, even to that ever blessed Spirit, One with the Father.

ELIHU COLEMAN.

Nantucket, the 20th of the  
11th month, 1729-30.